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EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS IN MISSISSIPPI

By DR. ROBERT B. FULTON, Chancellor of the University of Mississippi

In order to understand fully whatever of educational progress has been made in Mississippi during the last fifteen years, conditions which existed previous to that time should be kept in mind. In the ante bellum days the state had no public educational system. The lands granted by Congress in aid of public schools, amounting to one section in each township or about one-thirty-sixth part of all the lands in the state, had yielded no large fund for the support of education. Other funds for education were quite small. The state had been rapidly settled by immigration from the Southern states lying east of it, and the settlers were usually men of means. The per capita distribution of wealth among the whites in Mississippi immediately before the Civil War was large. Agricultural labor in the production of cotton was very remunerative. Schools of course existed only for the whites, and under private or church or community control. Such schools multiplied, and many of them did large and effective work. There was a general sentiment, founded upon individual independence and pride, which in the eyes of the public made it rather unseemly for any parent to depend upon the state for assistance in the education of his children.

The Civil War entirely changed these conditions. During the period of reconstruction some effort was made to organize a public school system. This was intended to afford equal opportunities to whites and blacks. Like many measures inaugurated in that period it incurred the odium of the tax-paying white people, and for many years little progress was made.

In the year 1890, under the administration of Hon. J. R. Preston, state superintendent of education, the first well marked effort was made to put life and vigor into the public educational system of the state. Superintendent Preston was instrumental in securing such legislation as required the examination of teachers applying for license by the state superintendent of education instead of under the direction of the county superintendents. The first examinations held in accordance with this policy showed the deficiencies of many teachers. Some were discouraged, others were stimulated. At that

time the state was receiving no help from the Peabody Education Fund, and there was no organized work maintained by the state in any school for the training of white teachers. In the fall of 1892 the faculty at the University, upon the suggestion of the chancellor, agreed to give at the University during the following summer courses which would be helpful to teachers in the public schools. Correspondence with the county superintendents of education had shown that between three and four hundred white teachers would probably be inclined to take advantage of such opportunity. The plan was proposed at the State Teachers' Association held in Jackson in December, 1892. At that time departments of pedagogy in state universities were coming into favor and the association placed on record its expression of favor for such department. In the month of January, following, Superintendent Preston secured from the secretary of the Peabody Education Fund, Dr. J. L. M. Curry, an appropriation sufficient to maintain one or two summer institutes for teachers in the State of Mississippi. One of these held at the University in the summer of 1893, brought together a course of four hundred and fifty teachers from the public schools, most of whom were sadly conscious of their own deficiencies. This was by far the largest assemblage of Mississippi teachers which had ever met. The mutual acquaintances and the stimulus derived from the lectures of prominent educators from various parts of the country gave great impetus in the right direction, and the work was most valuable, not only for what was accomplished, but more for what was projected. This was the beginning of the series of summer meetings at the University and elsewhere which has continued up to the present time, and with increasing interest and profit to the individual workers in the public schools as well as to education generally in the state. The last of these gatherings held at the University in June and July, 1903, was attended by more than seven hundred and fifty teachers, earnest in their desire for knowledge, skill, and increased efficiency in their work. The institution of state examination for license to teach has been undoubtedly of the greatest value in stimulating teachers and in securing better efficiency in their work, as well as the higher appreciation of their work by the public.

Another feature of far-reaching importance inaugurated during the administration of Superintendent Preston was the law authoriz-

ing the formation of separate school districts. In accordance with this law over seventy-five communities in the state were soon organized into separate districts, in which, by local taxation, excellent school buildings were erected, and provision made for the maintenance of well graded schools for a period of at least eight months in each year. These schools have in almost every case made rapid progress in the excellence of their work, and have won the fullest confidence and the cordial support of the local community. Many of them have developed good high school departments. All of them have drawn pupils from the surrounding rural districts, especially in their advanced grades. While these schools in the separate school districts do not reach more than 15 or 20 per cent of all the children of school age in the state, yet their success has been so marked that they have been a striking object lesson to other communities where conditions are not so favorable.

It should be borne in mind that in the State of Mississippi there are separate schools for whites and for negroes. The negro public schools are taught entirely by negro teachers. In the separate school districts and in the rural school districts the schools are maintained during terms of equal length for the two races.

In the year 1893, during the meeting of the teachers held at the University, a committee of ten was appointed to draft a model scheme for grading the better schools of the state and marking out for them and for high schools courses leading from the primary classes up to the freshman classes of the State University. A scheme was adopted, upon the report of this committee, by formal action of the State Teachers' Association. This was published, and has served as a model for the shaping of probably every graded school in the state. Previous to its adoption every teacher followed his own devices in the matter.

In the years 1892 and 1893 the authorities of the State University and the administrators of the public school system reached a definite understanding in regard to the relationship between the State University and the public school system by which the University and all other public schools were recognized as parts of one general system. Since that period the policy outlined by Mr. Jefferson for public education in Virginia, and first exemplified fully in the public school systems of the Northwestern states, has been practically controlling in Mississippi. There has been the heartiest

co-operation between the schools of all grades and the State University. Many of the graduates of the University have gone into the public school work, and many communities look to the University to supply them with efficient teachers.

The constitution of the state which has been in force since 1892 requires of every voter an educational qualification before he can exercise an elective franchise. It also requires that the legislature by general taxation provide sufficient funds to maintain the public schools for at least four months in each year, which funds shall be distributed to the several counties in proportion to the number of educable children. It also allows each separate school district to levy taxes within a reasonable limit to supplement the appropriation made by the state and to continue its school for a full session of nine months, and allows the several counties to make a supplemental levy sufficient to maintain public schools in the county for a period altogether of nine months in each year.

Whatever of advancement Mississippi has made in public education within the last ten years must be largely attributed to the legislation to which reference has been made. It is undoubtedly true that the requirement that a voter shall be able to read has placed a premium upon education, and that the silent working of this constitutional provision in the public mind has been wholesome. The separate school district law has given the opportunity for the development of good schools in the most favored localities. While it may have detracted something at first from the means of support of the rural schools in those counties where the separate school districts were maintained, yet upon the whole the establishment of good schools in the seventy-five or more separate school districts has undoubtedly afforded an object lesson of the greatest value to the neighboring rural districts. These, within the last five years, have felt very largely the stimulating effect of these object lessons. The legislation which allows the counties to make a special levy to maintain all the schools in the county for a longer period than four months has also been most wholesome. Nearly ten years ago County Superintendent Regan of Claiborne County, through his personal exertions, secured such a levy in his county as has maintained all the schools in the county for a period of eight or nine months each year. Other counties, amounting in number now to fully fifteen, have been induced to follow this example. Under the

aggressive administration of Superintendent Whitfield the work of lengthening the school term of the rural school by securing an additional tax levy in the counties has made rapid progress, and the end of the year 1903 will probably show that as many as thirty counties in the state have adopted this policy. It thus appears that the example set by the establishment of good schools in the separate school districts has accomplished vastly more for the rural schools than would have been accomplished if the funds used in the separate school districts had been equally distributed over the counties.

The school boards in the separate school districts are generally willing and anxious to provide every facility needed for improving the efficiency of these schools and for advancing the grade of instruction offered. It is worthy of note that never in the history of the state has there been such a large demand for thoroughly prepared and efficient teachers for the advanced grades and the high school departments of these schools as has been felt in the year 1903. These high schools are so distributed over the state as that no ambitious boy or girl need be deprived of a high school training. The larger and more complete development of these high schools is now one of the matters most urgently calling for attention in Mississippi. For this work competent high school teachers are in great demand. In order to meet these conditions the State University has arranged to expand its chair of pedagogy into a department of education. This department has been fully organized and will begin its work at the opening of the next session in September, 1903.

The advancement which has been made in the state in the last decade was strikingly evidenced by the very large number of teachers attending the Summer School of the University in 1903. As compared with those who attended in 1893 their numbers were twice as great and the evidenced proficiency largely more than thrice as great. The enthusiasm and intelligent interest in their work is a most hopeful prophecy for the rapid advancement for all work done in the public schools in Mississippi. The outlook is most encouraging in that it shows:

1. That the high school departments of the schools organized in the separate school districts are rapidly developing in efficiency and thoroughness, and are now placing opportunities for high school training in every county in the state and within reach of practically all the youth of the state.

2. That county taxation is rapidly solving the question of affording longer terms and better facilities for rural schools.

3. That the existence of good schools in the separate school districts has brought about a proper appreciation of good school work, and a larger demand for well trained and efficient teachers in the high schools as well as in the schools of lower grade, and a better appreciation of the fact that efficient teachers deserve adequate compensation for their services.

All that has been said above relates specially to schools for whites. While there are corresponding schools for negroes in the separate school districts, it should be remembered that social conditions have led to the employment of negro teachers exclusively in the negro schools, that we have been offering to the negro race identically the same form and method of instruction, with the use of the same text-books and facilities, which have been worked out for white children, and that we have tacitly been assuming that an education fitted for the Anglo-Saxon is that which should be offered to the negro children.

As a result of the prevailing conditions the advancement in education made by the negro race in Mississippi has not been as marked as that shown by the white race. It is probably true that in the elementary grades the negro child learns to read and learns the first rudiments as readily as the white child. Whether from racial or other conditions their work and advancement in the higher grades is not as largely successful in accomplishing desired results.

The public educational work which has been done for the negro race in Mississippi has been chiefly paid for by white taxpayers. This has been tacitly allowed as a matter of benevolence, and public policy rather than wise pedagogical discrimination has controlled public sentiment. One great problem of the future will be to determine what racial differentiation in the mode of education should be made for the negro race in view of his racial peculiarities and his social condition and family life. The fact that 60 per cent of the population of Mississippi belongs to this race gives special interest here to this question. Undoubtedly, more of moral and parental training is needed for this race. Industrial training of various kinds may help to a successful solution of the problem as to what educational facilities are most helpful to the negro race in Mississippi. The lack of proper home influences seems to be the most serious desideratum.